

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

In North Carolina, it is impossible to talk about its history without talking about its geography – the lay of the land, water, mountains, sea, hills, soils. Looking at a map of the East Coast of North America, you see all the possible places to “park a ship.” While many places along the coast include deep harbors, which are great for “parking” large sailing ships, looking at the coast of North Carolina, however, we see a stretch of islands barring the way for any large ship to get close to the mainland. Under the water, shallow shoals, reefs, and difficult currents exist. Combine these islands, which move with currents, shallow shoals, and frequent storms, and it is really difficult to “park” your ship.

The need for a warning system around these treacherous waters was known quite early in the history of the land we now call North Carolina. A light shining out to sea warns ships of danger nearby and saves lives and property. Using light to warn ships of coastal hazards existed for hundreds of years, and in colonial America, the first lighthouse—Boston Light on Little Brewster Island in Boston Harbor, Massachusetts—was built in 1716. In North Carolina, efforts to build much needed lighthouses began soon after the American Revolution. Several dozen lighthouses and vessels marked North Carolina’s coastline, but many were lost to time, war, and neglect over the years.

Today, our coast is known for seven lighthouses:

Old Baldy 1795, rebuilt 1817.

- Old Baldy lighthouse is North Carolina's oldest standing lighthouse. First built in 1795, it became endangered from erosion, was torn down and a new lighthouse built in 1817 using bricks from the old lighthouse.
- The 110-foot tower is an octagon with walls five feet thick at the base. During its active life, the lighthouse was whitewashed on a regular basis. It is accessible by ferry.
- Though many pirates and plunderers used the island as temporary refuge, the most famous of whom was Stede Bonnet, known as the "Gentleman Pirate."



Ocracoke 1803, rebuilt 1823.

- The shortest lighthouse on the Outer Banks, and accessible only by water or air, Ocracoke Island is one of the barrier islands of the Outer Banks of North Carolina where the pirate Blackbeard is known to have once roamed.
- The tower is 65 feet high, with a fixed white light as its signal pattern.
- Its brick base received a coating of cement which was whitewashed with a concoction of boiled, glued-on rice. Keepers had to apply the thick mixture from boiling vats as quickly as possible.
- In the 1700s, Ocracoke was one of the busiest inlets on the East Coast. For many years it was the only navigable waterway for ships trying to get to inland ports including Elizabeth City, New Bern, and Edenton.



Cape Hatteras 1803, rebuilt 1870.

- Its height at 210 feet to the top of the lightning rod makes it the tallest brick lighthouse in North America. To climb this lighthouse means going up 268 stairs.
- Located along Highway 12 south on Hatteras Island, the Cape Hatteras Light is a National Historic Landmark.
- It protects against dangerous Diamond Shoals.
- Originally, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was 1500 feet from the shore, but by 1999 it was a mere 100 feet



away from the ocean. International Chimney, Inc. successfully moved the Cape Hatteras Light Station 2,900 feet to the southwest of the original location, placing the tower 1,600 feet from the ocean's edge on July 9, 1999.

Cape Lookout, 1812, rebuilt 1859, 1875.

- The current tower at Cape Lookout was built in 1859, and is 163 feet tall, with a total of 269 steps to the top.
- Its light is still operational day and night and visible for 19 miles.
- Cape Lookout is the only major lighthouse that operates during the day.



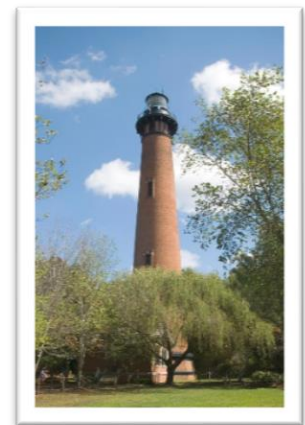
Bodie 1848, rebuilt in 1859 and 1872

- The first lighthouse on Bodie Island was poorly built on an unsupported brick foundation and it began to lean. A second lighthouse fared little better as it was destroyed during the Civil War by retreating Confederate troops.
- The current Bodie Island Lighthouse was completed in 1872. Early problems with flocks of geese crashing into the lens and improper grounding for electrical storms were quickly rectified with screening for the lantern and a lightning rod for the tower.
- Still, for many years, Bodie Island was completely undeveloped and the closest school was in Manteo on neighboring Roanoke Island (accessible only by boat, which made it a lonely place to work).



Currituck, 1875.

- The only lighthouse in North Carolina still housed in its original structure and one of only a dozen lighthouses nationwide with an original Fresnel lens still in use, the *Currituck Beach Lighthouse* is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
- The lighthouse remains today an active aid to navigation and serves a 40 mile stretch of the Atlantic coast between Cape Henry in Virginia and Bodie Island in NC.



- More than 200 stairs are in the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. It stands 163 feet high and is constructed of more than one million bricks.
- Unlike the other lighthouses on North Carolina's Outer Banks, the Currituck Beach Lighthouse was left unpainted.

Oak Island Lighthouse, 1958.

- While this lighthouse is 153 feet tall, its lights are 169 feet above the water, because it is built on a bit of a hill.
- Instead of a spiral staircase like older lighthouses, the Oak Island Lighthouse has 131 steps on ships ladders reaching the lantern gallery level.



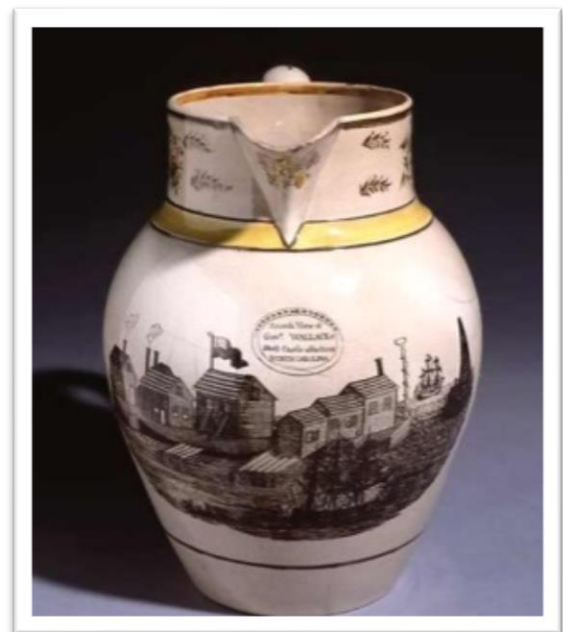
PRIMARY SOURCES:

Primary Sources are created at the time of an event, or later by someone who witnessed or experienced something first-hand and shared about it later. We often think of primary sources as old letters, diaries, and documents—and that's right! But, there's a lot more to consider. Buildings, shoes, portraits, photographs, objects, and more! are also primary sources and part of our job at the North Carolina Museum of History is to collect those objects and take care of them. Here are a few primary sources and artifacts connecting to this month's lesson.

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Shell Island Lighthouse:

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, John Wallace and John Gray Blount owned Shell Island, near Beaufort, North Carolina. The island served as a storehouse, lumberyard, and mill. Their shipping company imported many goods, including made to order items, like this jug, which includes the name Shell Castle and the *Tuley* on it, which was the name of the ship. You can see a lighthouse, built of logs, in the harbor of Shell Island on the pitcher. Eventually, the island was reclaimed by the sea and it no longer exists. But we know about it in part, due to this pitcher!



BOOK OF THE MONTH:

Keep the Lights Burning, Abbie. By Connie and Peter Roop. Illustrated by Peter E. Hanson. Millbrook Press, 1985.

“Abbie was afraid. She had never had to keep the lights burning by herself. But many lives depended on the lighthouse, and Papa was depending on Abbie. This is the exciting true story of Abbie Burgess, who in 1856 single-handedly kept the lighthouse lamps lit during a tremendous storm off the coast of Maine.”

LEXILE MEASURE:

260K

AVAILABLE FROM:

- [NC Public Library](#)
- [Amazon](#)

VOCABULARY:

1. ruffled—in this story, “rise up,” the chicken made her feathers unsettled
2. trim—cut
3. whitecaps—a small wave, with foam
4. wick—a strip of woven material that brings liquid, like oil, to the top, in a candle and lamp

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Abbie’s father have to leave the lighthouse?
2. What kept Abbie’s father from returning right away?
3. What did Abbie do to keep the lights burning?
4. Why was Abbie tired of eating eggs?
5. Why are lighthouses important?

ACTIVITIES:

- **Make a lighthouse using this link!**
- **Using the instructions below, make a paper boat.**

